

## **EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL**

**EXECUTIVE MEMBER:** Cllr Luke Henman, Executive Member for Children's Services

**DATE OF MEETING:** 26 March 2025

The purpose of this report is to provide an update to members on areas of activity within my portfolio including performance against strategic priorities.

### **COUNCIL PLAN PRIORITIES**

We will show Middlesbrough's children that they matter and work to make our town safe and welcoming and to improve outcomes for all children and young people.

### **KEY FIGURES**

- **Number of families accessing early help via Middlesbrough Council:** 637
- **Number of foster carers with Middlesbrough Council:** 80 foster carers, 56 connected carers, looking after a total of 178 children.
- **Number of children in our care:** 506
- **Percentage of children in our care in Education, employment or training:** 88.3% of all children aged five to 18. (96.7% of five to 15 years-olds and 64.5% for 16+.)

### **Highlights**

1. I attended a two-day LGC course recently in Warwick for portfolio holders in Children's Services. It was an opportunity to meet opposite numbers from different parties and councils, as well as mentors with huge experience as DCSs. It was really useful for me to listen to developments in the field, learn about areas to focus on and how to provide constructive challenge.
2. As mentioned below, last week was World Social Work Week and I was glad to have had the chance to drop into the event which the Learning, Review and Development Team organised to celebrate our staff. I had some fantastic conversations with social workers who shared their experiences. They really emphasised the importance of stability and consistency and the strides they felt we have made recently. They also shared with me areas they wanted to see improvement. I am incredibly proud of our staff and the work they do to keep young people safe, as well as the positive and inquisitive culture they have nurtured.
3. I met with fellow portfolio holders from across the Tees Valley recently, alongside a care experienced young person from Stockton to look at our care leaver's offer and the differences between our councils. We are collaborating to compare our offers and how we can make sure that a Middlesbrough young person living in Stockton, for example, can benefit from their care leaver offer.
4. I was proud to attend the Staff Awards where staff from across Children's Services were recognised and I want to add my thanks to all of them:

- a. Early Help were shortlisted for the Team Spirit category– the team are constantly adapting the way that they work to meet the needs of the families they work with, utilising a multi-agency approach, working closely with a variety of partners to make things better for families. The voice of the child is at the centre of their work.
- b. The Fostering Service were also nominated for Team Spirit award for their co-ordinated approach to supporting both the carers and the children that remain in our care. They ensure our brilliant foster carers receive the best training possible to give young people the best start in life.
- c. Anthony Bariek, who provides admin support to the fostering team was also nominated. He is known as friendly and humorous colleague who rises to every challenge with a smile. Anthony is really passionate about delivering the best service to our foster carers to ensure payments are right and made on time. Anthony really encompasses the Council's values on a day to day basis.
- d. Rosecroft Children's Home was shortlisted for the Extra Mile Award, and the Resource Team was shortlisted for the Delivering the Right Results Award, recognising the unwavering dedication and hard work of both teams.
- e. Independent Reviewing Officer, Helen Carling who was shortlisted for the 'Going The Extra Mile' Award. Helen went over and beyond to ensure that a young person in our care could spend the day with his family making memories to last a lifetime.
- f. The Resource team were nominated for the Delivering the Right Results award. The team's focus is proactive in stopping children entering the care system through creative and collaborative approaches that keep the children's needs at the heart of everything they do. In January 2025, the team supported 71 families a week, down from 116 families in 2024, this reduction in the need for intervention shows their approach is working.

### **Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH) and Assessment**

5. The MACH is our front door – the first point of contact for concerns about a young person. The social work staff team within the MACH are permanent workers and are very effective in the day-to-day screening and signposting to appropriate services to the children of Middlesbrough and their families. The Assessment Service determine what interventions are required after the MACH have dealt with the initial enquiry.
6. Morale has been positive and three workers that had been agency staff are converting to permanent workers, two within assessment and one within the MACH. This is a really positive sign – it is a sign of confidence in our council and a sign that we are rebuilding our reputation as an employer of choice. In addition, we have recruited one permanent member of staff that has started, and two more permanent workers will commence over the next few weeks reducing our agency worker number further. Advertisements are currently out for our remaining three positions.
7. As outlined previously, professional development, learning and reflection are vital to this service. The service is continuing its audit of our screening process to develop quality and ensure that we are determining the right outcomes for our children at the earliest opportunity. The team are also holding multi-Agency audits once per month and this is enabling staff to have challenge discussions around quality and areas of development. The MACH Strategic Board is an area that we are looking to further develop, so that we have accountability with Key Partners. Our assessment timeliness has continued to improve with 97.6% of or assessments being completed within 36-45 days and 82% within

35 days. The number of young people being dealt with per staff member has remained manageable. The service has just held a development session looking at timescale for our work, quality of assessment and visits, including direct work with children to include their experience. We know we need to continue to strengthen and support workers to achieve good quality assessments that are timely and meeting the needs of our children and families.

### **Early Help via the Stronger Families Service**

8. The Stronger Families service aims to support families early in order to stop the need for young people being taken into care. Working with families to keep children in a safe home is better for the young person's wellbeing and it is more cost effective.
9. Early help is the focus of our strategy to improving outcomes for young people and building a stable Children's Services. The average young person per practitioner is currently 19.2. This is the second lowest average in the previous 12 months. The Stronger Families Service continues to be a stable service where early help support is provided to 637 children and young people across 354 families. 66% of early help is held within the wider partnership which equates to 1260 children and young people.
10. As elsewhere across the directorate, the team is focussed on practice improvement and creating a culture where staff are supported to develop and learn. Four family practitioners are currently undertaking a social work degree, four family practitioners and two managers are completing a management qualification.
11. As part of our drive to continuously improve practice and reflect on work, monthly audits are completed to ensure quality of practice. From May 2024 – January 2025 audits of early help cases show that 3% have been graded as outstanding, 74% have been graded as good, 23% have been graded as required improvement, the service has no inadequacy. I'm proud of the open and honest attitude all of our staff approach reflection, learning and improving our practice. There has been a focus on improving the quality and impact of practice and the impact that 'My Family Plans' are having recently. This is reflected in improved outcomes for children and in the range of different services that are now taking on an Early Help Lead professional role.
12. We know that most children who have received early help services from Stronger Families do not come back into early help following 12 months of case closure, 76% have not come back into early help and 92% have not returned to Children's Social Care. This tells us that early help services are supporting families effectively and preventing the need for statutory services for the majority of families.

### **Fostering**

13. The Fostering Service is split into three teams focussing on recruitment, support to current approved carers and support to connected carers – carers within the young person's wider family or friendship circle. Foster carers provide stable and supportive homes for young people and the work they do is more effective in terms of outcomes and cost than residential placements.
14. Collaboration with Foster with North-East (FwNE) which looks at foster carer recruitment has approval to continue until September 2025, with a further decision being taken by DCSs in the region over the summer, as to the future of this project.
15. As part of the Modernising Fostering transformation programme, we have now recruited a Team Manager for the Kinship Team. Interviews for the Social Workers for the team are

currently underway. The work of the Kinship Team will be key in ensuring that support and a review process is in place and training is made available, along with support groups for carers looking after extended family members. This will mean foster carers and young people are given the correct support, guidance, and advice and avoid the need for more costly and less effective alternatives.

## **Cared for Children**

16. Within Middlesbrough there are currently 506 children who are cared for with a further two children exiting care in March. Work has continued to progress with progression to Court to discharge Care Orders, or seek other orders such as, Child Arrangement Orders or Special Guardianship Orders, via the DfE funded workers. The funding for this will cease at the end of this month. This work will continue as part of 'business as usual' in the teams. This has been a positive piece of work for the service and has given us the opportunity to work with potential carers to understand the barriers to them wanting to care long-term for children and young people in their wider family. The most common issues are a lack of financial support and worries that when a Care Order is discharged, they would not have support from the Authority in the long-term.
17. The lower caseloads for Social Workers have been maintained and we continue to see a high level of knowledge from workers regarding the children and young people, they are working with ensuring reports are accurate and work is progressed within timescales. This has been recognised in the increased compliments from IROs, the Courts and other professionals. The staff team has remained stable with an increase in permanent staff being recruited over the past two months. Recruitment of permanent staff remains a key focus. Performance is closely monitored, with systems in place within the teams, to support and address this. Work will be undertaken jointly between the teams and the Performance Team, to look at the data currently being collated and what we can do to improve this going forward, to ensure we can provide a consistently accurate picture of the work within the service.

## **Pathways team - supporting our young people moving into adulthood**

18. Further work has continued around training and support to Personal Advisors. A review of this training is taking place at the end of March 2025. We have in place consistent managers, liaising with colleagues in Housing. This regular meeting ensures Housing colleagues are aware of all young people from 16 years, who may have a future housing need. By using this method young people can be added to the housing list prior to 18 and this accrued time is then evidenced at 18, when housing is needed. This also assists Housing in understanding future needs for care experienced young people, who can then plan what is needed. It is hoped that previous significant delays in suitable housing being made available, will be resolved.
19. The majority of the staff team remain permanent employees, with the additional 5 posts being interim, whilst the decision on the establishment of the team is agreed. There have been a couple of recent changes in the agency staff group, who have brought significant skills and knowledge to the team in relation to exploitation. Agency workers are keen to take up permanent posts within the service when plans are finalised.

## **Safeguarding & Care Planning, Children with Disabilities, Aspire and Pre-birth Team**

20. The Safeguarding & Care Planning team support children on a Child in Need and Child Protection plans, as well as children that are looked after for up to six months. Our Aspire team sits within this team and focusses on supporting children who are

vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking or falling into criminal activity. We continue to monitor closely the number of children allocated to social workers and have seen an increase as children require allocation swiftly from assessment within our Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams. These numbers are higher than we would like. That said the social workers continue to ensure children are seen in timescales required meaning their experiences are understood.

21. We continue to have the challenge of high numbers of children allocated to our social workers. Just under half of that cohort are children subject to child protection plans and a further 15% are children in care, indicating that a majority of children in the service are experiencing or have experienced risk of significant harm. This highlights an increasing level of complexity within the service and social workers and managers are working hard to ensure consistent service delivery and response to need. We continue to prioritise safeguarding our most vulnerable children and are assured through the data that children are seen regularly and social workers are benefiting from supervision for support and guidance in what is a challenging environment at this time. We have increased capacity by virtue of five newly qualified social workers moving into the teams from the academy.
22. Within Children with Disabilities, we are now reviewing all children who access short breaks at Gleneagles, to give us assurance that the right children have that support and that we understand the demand for the service as we reshape it to meet the needs of families in Middlesbrough. At this time, we know we are buying in and commissioning services as we are unable to offer all children support through Gleneagles that require it and this exercise is aimed at improving this so more children are supported through Gleneagles and Home Support.

### **Residential and Supported Accommodation**

23. Gleneagles Short Breaks Services and Willowtree Children's Home underwent Ofsted Full Inspections, with both receiving Good ratings in all areas. The feedback from the Ofsted inspectors was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the quality of care provided. To ensure continued readiness for future inspections, Quality Assurance support has been implemented to assist managers in maintaining Ofsted compliance. I'd like to congratulate all the staff involved.
24. The commissioned service for one of our homes has recently been reviewed, reflecting the evolving needs of the children's service. This review was prompted by the move of one child to an alternative external provision that can better meet their individual needs. Additionally, alternative provisions are being explored for the other children to address their unique care planning complexities.
25. A review of the staffing structure across the homes is ongoing, and the findings will guide future steps, ensuring alignment with value-for-money objectives. This review will continue into 2025.
26. The Admissions Policy and Procedures have been successfully implemented, fostering transparency and ensuring a multi-agency approach to the matching and admissions process for children. As a result of robust joint working, occupancy across our homes has shown improvement, demonstrating the effectiveness of collaborative efforts in enhancing service delivery.

### **Learning, Review and Development**

27. Improving the quality and consistency of practice is a priority for Children's Services as a whole. Our Quality Assurance team have developed and timetabled training and delivered

one-to-one support to practitioners in relation to best practice. Upcoming training covers understanding the lived experience of children, voice of the child and recording direct work, analytical assessment training and risk analysis training. Audit training sessions are timetabled for January 2025 for all Children's Social Care staff who complete audits.

28. It was World Social Work day on the 18th March and we held a week of training opportunities and information sharing, starting with an opportunity for staff to meet with senior leaders, take time to reflect on their roles and their wellbeing, celebrate success and discuss examples of good practice as well as learn new self-care strategies. I dropped into the event and had some brilliant conversations with our staff who gave me their account of the challenges they face but also shared their excitement at the improvements we are seeing in our service. Throughout the whole of the week there are also training sessions being delivered on key areas of practice, including understanding the lived experiences of children and young people.
29. The Quality Assurance team continue to provide one to one audit support and drop-in sessions to staff who request additional discussion or training.
30. Middlesbrough has a longstanding relationship with Frontline, with 2025 being our 8th year of collaboration. Frontline consistently advise that students want to come to Middlesbrough as their first option and this year both of our Frontline Consultant Social Workers have been nominated for awards in recognition of the great work they do with our Middlesbrough students. Shortlisting and judging for the awards are taking place in March and if successful our consultants will be invited to an awards ceremony in London in May this year.
31. The Independent Reviewing Officer service continue to have some pressure associated with one staff member having some sickness issue and we wish them all the best. The managers are in the process of seeking a temporary IRO to support the service, as sadly some of that sickness is likely to be longer-term.
32. Our Participation team continues to work with our cared for children and young people to hear from them how we better shape and improve services. They also continue to work within local schools canvassing the views of Middlesbrough children and young people. The Participation team has drafted a refreshed Participation Strategy, within which they are seeking to increase their reach across Middlesbrough's children and young people. In addition to this the team are preparing an annual forecast of events to support increased engagement through allowing people to free up diaries in advance.